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A REMINISCENCE

OF THE

TROUBLOUS TIMES OF APRIL, 1861.

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OF THE

TROUBLOUS TIMES OF APRIL, 1861,

Based upon Interviews with the Authorities at Washington, touching
the movement of troops through Baltimore.



A Paper read before the Maryland Historical Society,

March 9th, 1891,

By HON. J. MORRISON HARRIS.

Baltimore, 1891.

A REMINISCENCE
OF THE
TROUBLOUS TIMES OF APRIL, 1861.

*Mr. President, and Gentlemen of
The Historical Society,—*

NEARLY thirty years have passed since the event to which this Paper refers, and which at your request, Mr. President, I have the honor to submit, occurred. Some of those whom I address participated in the painful anxieties of the time, and perhaps in the courage of their convictions were subsequently active in the momentous struggle then inaugurated. To others, fortunate in a later birth, the succeeding incidents of the great war are familiar as matters of history. To both classes, the interest is, and will continue to be, intense. I need not, therefore, apologize for recalling some features of the case which, though local in their character, were pregnant with grave consequences to the people of this City and State, and created a fierce and influential excitement in other sections of the country.

The pivots upon which the aggrandizement or overthrow of Empires turns are apt to be small and apparently unimportant, but he who traces the lines of historic sequence cannot so regard them. The passage of troops enrolled for the protection of a beleaguered Capital and an imperilled Federal Government, through the territory of a State still in the Union would seem to be a matter of right simple enough in its nature, and which under ordinary circumstances would neither have created comment nor excited opposition. At the period we are considering, however, the circumstances were in a high degree extraordinary, and such transit was held by many to involve a vital principle and a high political right. A significant importance attaches therefore to all the steps that were taken to claim for the special surroundings the fullest consideration on the part of the general government and involved the right to ask that existing arrangements that threatened so much serious disaster should be wisely modified, so that the inevitable conflict between the troops then on the outskirts of the City and our own citizens armed to oppose them might be happily avoided. What was done therefore on this line has its special value, for by it the dreaded emergency was avoided, while at the same time the instant needs of the Government were met. But more than this was attained, for in my own opinion the result of such armed conflict

would have gone far towards pressing Maryland into the column of the seceding states, with the probable effect of making her the battle-field of the opening war and the burdenbearer of the lamentable consequences that fell upon her neighboring and sister state.

I may here be allowed the briefest reference to the general condition of the country just antedating and immediately succeeding our local troubles. One month before their occurrence, the 36th Congress terminated. South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, and Virginia have ceased to be States of the Union, and by November, 1861, Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, Ken-tucky, and Missouri had also passed ordinances of secession.

The closing session of the 36th Congress will remain distinguished in history as the battle-field of the mightiest conflict of opposing principles that has occurred since the formation of the Government. In it were developed the fiercest passions, the bitterest sectional animosities, the most patriotic conservatism, and the most earnest spirit of moderation. The struggle of the sections with each other was fierce almost to the shedding of blood on the floor of the House, but, though far as the poles apart as to the grounds of their contention, they dominated Congress in a practical consensus that

overpowered all conservative counsel, and their united voices were all for war.

In some of the Border States, and conspicuously in Maryland, every effort was made to arrest the alternative by the suggestion of measures calculated to reach a solution of the pending questions, wise in their nature and seeking to deal fairly with the differing interests. As, however, "inter arma silent leges," so, in so mighty a contention, such suggestions were futile and such voices unheard. Looking backward with that "hindsight" that is always so much wiser and clearer than any foresight we possess, it is easy enough to see that the great issue to which the country had through long years been tending could not have been, was not intended to be, avoided. War was its logical point of culmination, and it came. Neither with the causes that led up to it, nor the motives or influences acting upon individuals or states, have I anything whatever to do on this occasion. As one great fact of the centuries past, it will go down with its sad memories and its heroic achievements through the centuries to come. With us, it is a thing of the past, never to be forgotten, but past! The winds of Heaven that return again in their circuits have blown the smoke of its battle-fields, together with its great fame, over the whole earth; and happily for us, time, that softens asperities and knits again the ties of brotherhood, enables us to

unite in a common appreciation of some of the great results it wrought out.

From the morals of the nation it has removed the stain, and from one great section of the country it has lifted the burden, of slavery. The imperative necessity of labor it entailed has broken the inertia that so long limited the development of the Southern States, in which there has now come to the front a new generation, full blooded and earnest, that, while it may remember the traditions of its past, is instinct with the energies of its present, and which, purposeful and practical, is building up again that beautiful land whose homes were shattered and whose fields were devastated, with a success that is phenomenal, and that promises to be enduring.

It has done more than this. It has consolidated an inseparable Union, and developed in the American people a capacity for war that is at once a wonder and an admonition to all nations. It has also placed upon the roll of the world's great captains the achievements of leaders whose reputation equals, if it does not eclipse, that of the most distinguished Generals of the age; while it has presented to the military criticism of Europe a soldiery that, fresh from the peaceful avocations of life, developed an endurance and illustrated a gallantry, under whichever flag they fought, that compels our unstinted and impartial admiration.

And so out of seeming evil hath good come, and he who to-day would recall that great event or review the momentous incidents that preceded or accompanied it, to perpetuate bitterness and foment animosity is recreant to our manliest instincts and antagonizes the controlling sentiment of the American people.

On coming into the City from my residence in Baltimore County, on Saturday, the 20th of April, 1861, I found a terrible condition of excitement existing, and was assured by many gentlemen who represented both phases of the popular feeling, that a large body of troops, supposed to be the Seventh Regiment of New York, had crossed the Susquehanna and were believed to be near the Gunpowder in full march toward the City en route to Washington; and that the certain armed opposition they would encounter in their attempted passage through Baltimore would ensure a repetition upon a far larger and more serious scale of the disastrous incidents of the preceding day, leading not only to much bloodshed but certain to result hurtfully to the character and interest of the City. Satisfied of the correctness of these conclusions from my own knowledge and observation, it occurred to me, that, as I had just terminated a service of six years in the House of Representatives, from a district composed in large part of the City of Baltimore, if the Honorable Anthony Kennedy, who was at the

time in the Senate, would unite with me in representing to the President, the exact condition of affairs, some modification of existing arrangements might be obtained by which the grave dangers apprehended, would be avoided; and that as it was reported that the troops from New York had been halted by the Government at the Susquehanna, those approaching the City through Baltimore County, and at the time only some twenty miles distant, might also be diverted to some other route.

Mr. Kennedy instantly assented to the propriety of the proposed visit, and on being informed of our purpose, Mr. Garrett, the President of the Baltimore and Ohio, promptly put at our service an Engine and Car, and we left the City at twenty minutes to one o'clock, having telegraphed to the President asking an interview on our arrival. Having a clear road, the rate of travel was at a speed more remarkable than comfortable.

On reaching Washington we found a carriage awaiting us and a message from the President, that he would see us immediately. We found him engaged with the Secretary of State, Mr. Seward, to whom, after greeting us cordially, he suggested that they would lay aside their business and hear at once the purpose of our visit. We then stated to him what we understood to be the gravity of condition. The great excitement and the exasperation of feeling in the City consequent upon the

painful occurrences of the previous day, intensified by the knowledge that a large body of volunteer troops from Pennsylvania were on their march to, and within some twenty miles of, the City. We urged that while the State had always been loyal to the Government, and steadfast in her adhesion to the Union, and that in our judgment that was still the attitude of the majority of her people, and while the Governor had done everything calculated in his judgment to maintain this position and as we had understood was prepared to recognize the call of the President for troops; yet that Maryland was a Southern State; allied to that section by sympathies of blood, of sentiment, geographical position, and her large slaveholding, manufacturing, and business interest, and had so far with her whole energy of purpose and action successfully breasted the tide of the secession movement, it could not be denied that a considerable number of her people, especially concentrated in the City, were fully in sympathy with it and were there organized and armed to resist the passage of troops through the City. That practically its government was in the control of this element, and while both the Mayor, and the Chief of Police, though the latter sympathized with the South, had courageously and nobly exerted themselves to protect the Massachusetts Regiment the previous day, it was more than doubtful whether they would be

able to control the far more serious outbreak that would attend the attempted passage of the approaching levies, only a part of whom were reported to be fully armed; that the outlets of streets through which they would enter were barricaded and guarded by armed men of whom it was understood nearly four thousand were prepared to oppose their entry. That the City was rapidly becoming a camp, and that collision was certain, and that we were confronted, whichever side was successful in the fight, with tumult and bloodshed, with a probable conflict between our own citizens. We further insisted that it was worth considering what would be the effect on the other Border States still steadfast in their adhesion to the Union, and whether such consequences as I had outlined were calculated to strengthen the Government; that so far as the Union sentiment in Maryland was concerned, given a fair field, it would be found able to take care of itself, and that we thought something might be conceded to the interest and good name of the chief City of the State, especially as what was asked of the Government was really but a choice between two ways of attaining an end.

The President listened with courtesy and attention to the statement, and replied that he appreciated the difficulties of our position. That the troops ordered to Washington were essential for the defence of the Capital, then threatened, and

liable at any moment to assault. That it was intended they should pass through peaceably, giving offence to no one, and doing nothing calculated to excite opposition. That he had been led to believe that their transit through the State would be peaceable and unopposed, and expressed great surprise at the occurrences of the day before, and was proceeding with some feeling to comment on them, when I begged him to recall the fact that the authorities of the City, as well as the Governor, had done all they could at great personal risk to protect the troops and that the Mayor and Chief of Police had put themselves at the head of the column in its progress through the streets.

The President said he took back the remark I seemed to consider unjust. That he did not desire to say anything calculated to produce angry or unpleasant feeling, and stated that he believed the authorities had acted in a prompt and honorable manner. He then went on to enlarge upon the embarrassments of the Government, and said that he was there at its head by the voice of the People, charged with its administration, entrusted with the defence of the archives of the Government and the safety of the Federal Capital. That he must perform the duties incumbent upon him; that the Capital was threatened and must be reinforced: that under the circumstances the only avenue by which reinforcements could be obtained was

through the State of Maryland; that prominent gentlemen accredited by the authorities of the City and the Governor of the State had seen him at an earlier hour that morning and had made statements as to the condition of things in Baltimore corresponding with my own; that in their presence he had asked General Scott if they could get the troops on without further inflaming the people of Baltimore, and the General had suggested that it might be done by marching them around the City; that with this arrangement those gentlemen were satisfied and gratified, and he had authorized such an arrangement; that we now came to him to demand that the troops should not be marched through Maryland at all; that the demand, or statement that the troops would not be allowed to pass through the State, was equivalent to the abdication of the Government, and that he might as well abdicate or at once go and hang himself on the first tree.

At this point of the conversation with the President, the Secretary of the State, Mr. Seward, said that he fully appreciated the troubles surrounding us in Baltimore, but insisted that those of the Government at Washington were also entitled to be considered by us, that they had been placed by the people at the Federal Capital, charged with its keeping and the archives of the Government, that they must have reinforcements, and that the aban-

donment of the Capital might involve the destruction of the Government, and insisted that no troubles now surrounding us at Baltimore, or that we were likely to encounter, were to be compared with the terrible consequences of the breaking up of the Federal Government.

I replied that it was evident we were misunderstood upon two of the points referred to. That we had come authorized by no one to make demands, nor had we in fact made any. That our visit was influenced solely by a sense of duty and the earnest hope that a candid presentation of existing facts which we thought the authorities should clearly appreciate in their own interests, as well as our own local involvement, might possibly tend to the preservation of peace, that the circumstances were peculiar and the emergency in our judgment a very serious one. That as for myself, I suggested no question of the right of the Federal Government under existing circumstances to pass its troops through one of the States of the Union, but that we did urge with great solicitude the question of the wisest and least dangerous mode of exercising the right, and that we could not but regard the imminent contingency of an armed conflict in the streets of the City as certain still further to complicate dangerously the general situation, as well as bringing in its train consequences locally disastrous.

My associate, Senator Kennedy, concurred in the views thus presented and very earnestly enforced them, and during his conversation with the President, Mr. Seward took me to one of the windows overlooking the Potomac and pointing to the heights of Arlington said, "Mr. Harris, what would you think of our position if I were to tell you that behind those heights, men were now excavating for redoubts, and that lower down the River batteries were already erected?" I replied that it would be very painful news to me, and I was far from underestimating the perilous position of the Government, but that I was one of many who thought that the terrible troubles of the Country might even yet be in reach of adjustment and that instant effort should be made to settle them without the horrible alternative of Civil War, but that if so fortunate a result was not possible, the Government must accept its responsibilities and we must meet ours.

Mr. Kennedy having closed his conversation with the President, we rose to leave, when the President said, that he wished us to go to General Scott's Quarters and have a conversation with him. I remarked that it seemed hardly necessary to do that, as we supposed we were already possessed of the views of the Government. No, said he, I prefer that you should see General Scott; that we must be aware that Government was acting under the advice of experienced military men. That

General Scott might be able to give us important information and that he wished us to see him.

We went at once to the General's Quarters, but as the door of the Council Chamber was closing behind us we heard from some one in the room, the exclamation; "God save the country." I should mention that during the greater part of the interview with the President, the Secretary of the Navy was also present but took no part in the conversation.

General Scott, whom we both knew well, received us very cordially, and our interview with him was less restrained. We made substantially the same statement as to the President, though in a more full and unconventional manner, telling him what had occurred at the Executive Mansion, and that we had come at the request of the President, who had directed us further to say to him that he would accept in advance any conclusions that he, General Scott, might reach. The General, after hearing attentively all that we had to say, stated the purposes for which the troops were needed at Washington; the inoffensive manner in which it was desired to march them; the fact that Maryland was the natural highway for their advance; that there was no other mode of obtaining the requisite reinforcements; that Washington, though an open town, was rapidly approaching the condition of a close siege; that desiring to avoid as much as pos-

sible excitement on the part of the people of the City and State, he was willing that other troops should pass from the Susquehanna to Annapolis and thence to Washington; that he had no assurance of transportation from Annapolis, nor did he know that the transport boat at the Susquehanna would not be seized; that in diverting these troops from Baltimore and ordering their transit by Annapolis, he thought that the comparatively sparse population between that point and the Capital would tend to avoid collision. We suggested that even if collision should occur on that route, it would be very different in character from a conflict in the streets of a City of over two hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants, in which it was well known there was an armed and organized force of several thousand men determined to provoke the conflict. "Well," he replied, "we will obtain the reinforcements, peaceably if possible," but that they did not mean to be shut up like rats in a trap, and that if they could not get the reinforcements in any other way, they must cut their way through; but that while the need of Government was such as to make reinforcement essential, he wished to do everything possible to avoid offence or aggravation to our people, and was willing to order the troops we referred to to pass by another route. He expressed great anxiety on the subject and his earnest desire that the movement might be quietly made, but that

they must have the troops ; and suggested that we should all go to the War office and talk the matter over with Secretary Cameron.

We went accordingly to the Department of War, and made substantially the statement we had submitted to the President and General Scott. It encountered prompt and positive opposition from the Secretary, and a long and heated discussion ensued. At length, the Secretary seemed more disposed to appreciate the difficulties of the situation, and we suggested their avoidance by the concentration of the troops at Annapolis, and their transit by rail from that point to Washington. This plan met the approval of General Scott, as it relieved the case of the apprehended trouble of possible conflict if the troops marched through the country. The Secretary, however, insisted that transportation by rail was out of the question, as he was sure that the Railroad Company would refuse to concede it. Believing that the arrangement could be made, however, we urged him to relieve the difficulty in the mode we suggested, and which General Scott was willing to adopt, upon our obtaining from Mr. Garrett his assurance that he would see that the necessary arrangements should be made for the transfer of the troops from Annapolis. The Secretary continued very incredulous on this point, but after much further conversation not necessary to repeat, he finally assented

to the proposed plan provided we obtained from Mr. Garrett such assurances as would satisfy him that the transportation would be furnished, which, however, he was satisfied we would not succeed in obtaining. Differing with him, however, in this opinion, we returned to the City, and informed Mr. Garrett, who was anxiously awaiting our report, of all that had been done and the ultimatum of the Secretary of War. He promptly concurred in the arrangement, and a telegram was at once sent to the Secretary giving the required assurance.

In the evening of the same day, Mr. Kennedy and I had an interview, by request, with the Police Board, then practically in control of affairs in the City, and reported what had been the incidents and outcome of our voluntary mission, and upon consultation it was thought desirable, in view of some of the peculiar features of the local situation, and the visit we were to make to the Camp of the Pennsylvania troops then near Cockeysville, in Baltimore County, which had been arranged at the War office, that some action should be taken by the Board, and the letter which follows was given us, in the way of municipal credentials.

“OFFICE BOARD OF POLICE.

BALTIMORE, *April 21, 1861.*

“Honorable Anthony Kennedy, Senator, and J. Morrison Harris, Representative in the House of

Representatives, are the gentlemen in whose hands this is placed.

“They had an interview yesterday (Saturday), about three o’clock, P. M., in Washington with his Excellency, President Lincoln. They proceed at the request of the Civil Authorities of Baltimore, to state to the commanding officers of any bodies of troops from other states whom they meet, the assurances given to them, with the anxious desire to prevent such occurrences as would at this juncture inevitably result from the approach of such troops to the vicinity of the City.

“By Order of The Board of Police,

“CHARLES HOWARD,

President.

“J. C. BLACKBURN, *Acting Mayor.*

I concur in the above.”

To this was affixed the official Seal of the Board.

On the morning of the 21st, accompanied by a General Officer detailed from the War office, we started for Cockeysville. The troops in question were found encamped on an eminence some distance beyond that point. There were, we understood, about eleven hundred of them. They appeared to be raw levies and we were told that not more than a couple of hundred of them were provided with arms. We had an immediate interview with the

officer in command, who was a very courteous gentleman and evidently impressed by the difficulties of his position, and who had taken every precaution in his power to guard against surprise. The congregation of several hundred armed men in full view at Cockeyville, and the bitter and outspoken threats that were uttered by those who hung around his camp, evidenced only too plainly the popular feeling, and the message we brought to him from Washington, by which without dereliction from duty he was justified in changing his environment, corroborated as it was by the concurrence of the Army Officer, General Howard, who accompanied us, gave him evident relief. I have said the message we brought, as, not having yet been regularly mustered into the service, he was not the subject of a formal order from the Department. After talking over the whole business, we entered into a sort of irregular convention under which he decided to counter-march his forces to the Susquehanna and await the further direction of his route. As we passed through the Camp, and saw the condition of his men and noted how many of them were without arms, and recalled the state of feeling in the City and the steps that had there been taken to repel their approach, we could not but realize that a great impending calamity had been avoided by what had been accomplished in the interest of all parties concerned.

As we drove back we found a crowd of some four to five hundred men collected around the Tavern and in the road at Cockeysville, who were in a state of wild excitement. We had passed up to the Camp without notice, but it had apparently become known, or was suspected, that our errand had been for the purpose of preventing the movement of the troops toward the City, and as, incautiously our driver stopped in the midst of the crowd to water his horses, we were assailed with expressions of opinion far more emphatic than polite or reassuring. Some of the crowd suggested that we should be hauled out and dealt with on the spot; while others more kindly disposed directed the driver to get on with all possible speed. Just as we were starting, an incident occurred that illustrated the temper of the times. Our army friend who was sitting beside me, touched me sharply on the arm saying, "Look at that man standing out there on the right; he has taken dead aim at one of us and I think you are in for it." I was quickly of his opinion, for I seemed to see down the whole length of the rifle he was pointing at us, and which fortunately was at the moment suddenly struck up, as I learned afterwards, by a personal friend of mine who stood beside him. We were, however, chased by some of the party for a long distance, but were able to make better time, and got to the City without further molestation. We found the heads of the principal streets opening into Baltimore

County and by which the troops from Cockeyville were expected to enter, barricaded and guarded by armed men who swarmed in all directions, and thus left no room for doubt as to the consequences that would have ensued had their passage through the City been attempted.

It may be interesting to mention that the Honorable Salmon P. Chase was present during the discussion at the War office, and in talking over the condition of affairs generally expressed to me with much earnestness, the opinion that the best way out of the difficulty would be to let the Cotton States go and trust to arrangements of amity and commerce for the preservation of peace and their ultimate return to the Union.

Let me also remark that other efforts were made to avoid our local troubles by Messrs. John Brune, S. Teackle Wallis, Judges Dobbin and Bond, and later by Judge Dobbin, Mr. Wallis, and the then Mayor, Honorable George William Brown, which are all fully referred to in the publication made not long since by the latter; and which were earnest and influential in controlling the results finally obtained.

J. MORRISON HARRIS.

IVY HILL, BALTIMORE COUNTY,

March 9th, 1891.

[MEM.—The statements of the interviews referred to in the foregoing paper are made from full notes written in April, 1861, immediately after the events occurred.—J. M. H.]

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